The Direction of *In the Heart of America* by Naomi Wallace

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Abstract

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This thesis documents a portion of the capstone assignment for the Professional Director Training Program. It specifically includes the text analysis and director's concept for Naomi Wallace's *In the Heart of America.* The show was produced and ran March 2 -17, 2019 at The Floyd and Delores Jones Playhouse as part of the School of Drama's mainstage season on the campus of the University of Washington.

For my mom, who lived to see the day.

My first encounter with *In the Heart of America* was during my undergrad just after we, the United States, invaded Iraq. I had been studying abroad in London when 9/11 happened and was shocked to return home, literally to the heart of America, (I grew up in Wisconsin,) and discover a changed country that felt barely recognizable. What I remember from my first encounter with the play, was that it somehow captured both the cultural conflict of the heartland, and the complicity of my government in the seemingly never ending war in the Middle East. And so, fifteen years ago, I put the play on a list of shows I would like to direct someday, and forgot many of the other details. When it came time to choose a thesis play, I picked it up again: The play spoke deeply about both the changing and unchanging heart of America.

In the Heart of America is the story of a young Palestinian-American woman who has gone in search of her brother, a soldier listed by the US Army as missing after serving in Desert Storm. In a motel room in Kentucky, she confronts his "friend," a white soldier named Craver, about her brother Remzi's whereabouts and why he sent her a ram's horn before his death. As the play unfolds in several interwoven and sometimes colliding timelines, we see two stories: that of her search, and that of Craver and Remzi's developing relationship. The three are haunted by the intersection of their lives with the ghosts of America's never ending wars in the form of a Vietnamese victim of the My Lai Massacre and the soul of the man who murdered her child. What I had forgotten in those fifteen years was that with all of its politics, *In The Heart of America* revolves around a love story between Craver and Remzi, men who seemingly have no connection, but who forge one in the midst of the unimaginable shattering of war. Not only do they fall in love, they bridge a divide that in Trump's America seems unbridgeable, they show us America at its best in the middle of America at its worst. The tragedy of *In The Heart of America* occurs when Remzi is killed by American soldiers after the two men are found together.

This past summer I spent a great deal of my time abroad thinking about what it means to be American. Seventeen years after 9/11, I was standing looking at the Berlin Wall for the first time this fall, when I got an email from my fourteen year old niece who lives on a farm in Wisconsin. She wanted to interview me about where I was on September 11th, and how it had

changed my perception of the world. I was hit with that question again: What does it mean to be American? I wandered around Berlin seeing monument after monument to the unspeakable atrocities that had occurred in that country, and that had been perpetrated by their citizens on their citizens. Whether or not it was working, there was a clear public mission to name the atrocities in order to prevent repeating them. It was a nation reckoning with how to learn to love itself when love of country was once so badly mutated that it became a murdering machine. I found myself wondering what it would be like to live in a country that did the same and realized that this is so much of what *In the Heart of America* is about for me. It is about what it means to be American, to take one's country to task for it's transgressions as an act of patriotism. It explicitly outlines how oppression is used as a weapon, how monsters are made, and how our own identities are turned against us - in this case race and sexual identity specifically.

The heart of America is literally a location: the "current" portion of the play takes place in Kentucky. Wallace is looking at the social divisions in that physical heart and has put people together there whose lives don't normally overlap. She is also referring to the heart of America as a spiritual place. The name of the play is a preposition, a phrase where something comes before or after: "_____ in the heart of America" or "In the heart of America, _____" The name is the recognition of something inside. It is not a phrase stolen from the line of a character; it is a phrase dictating that this is a play about a national soul and what's inside it. The heart is of course the center of a body, a body that cannot live without it beating. America needs a beating heart, a soul, to live a healthy life.

When I came back to the play last spring one of the thoughts I had was: "there is a light somewhere in here that I don't understand yet." I returned from my trip this fall, very clear that Naomi Wallace, this American expat, was clearly wondering from abroad both what it meant to be American and what it would mean if we looked deeply at all the unnamed things buried in the heart of our country. But what was that lightness I felt amidst the gore and tragedy? I made a chart of all the entrances and exits, started looking at timelines, and realized I'd missed perhaps the entire point of the thing. The ghost of war and the ghost of the

perpetual victim disappeared a few scenes from the end. Why? Fairouz finds out at the beginning of the first act that her brother is dead. But that's not the end of the play. The play ends after the ghosts leave. So what happens that makes them leave?

As I went back to the text with that question, I realized that in my other current project I had been thinking about a ripping apart of self, a moment when identity divides, the way our trauma can separate us from ourselves. And there, very clearly in the text, Boxler, the ghost of the war and the supposed soul of the real life Lt. Rusty Calley says: "Calley is still alive and well in Georgia, only I've run out on him. I'm his soul. Calley's dead soul." (Wallace 132)

And in the moment before the ghosts leave, Lue Ming forces him to do the thing he has never done, face the trauma of the act that separated his body and soul, to make :

> Lue Ming and Fairouz - The sound-
> Fairouz: ... you made inside you. Not the second time.
> Lue Ming: Not the third of fourth. But the first time you died. (Wallace 132)

As Wallace sets up the climactic sound of the play, the women then say:

> Fairouz: Do you know what it sounds like?
> Lue Ming: What it sounds like to go on living[?] (Wallace 133)

A moment later Fairouz, Lue Ming, and Boxler scream "no" simultaneously while jets fly overhead interrupting Craver and Remzi's intimate moment - the last they share alive in the play. The ghosts disappear and Remzi only appears as a vision from that point forward. This moment of feeling and making the sound of dying, is the main event of the play.

If we look at and name what's buried in the heart of America can we interrupt the cycle? Wallace seems to think we might.

> Fairouz: It's terrible, isn't it? To be freed like this. Are you going to talk?
> Craver: I'm going to try.
> Fairouz: But what is it for?
> Craver: It might keep me alive. Talking about it might keep me alive. (Wallace 138)

Calley's dead soul has been vanquished at this point, and Craver is recognizing that in order to live, he has to face what is in his heart and speak that truth.

Thanks to my trip to Germany and this re-investigation of the text, I realized that in this moment, Wallace commits the radical act of hoping that not only the characters, but our nation, can by making and feeling the sound of dying, live. She sets up confronting our atrocities as the ultimate act of patriotism. In an active sense, each of the characters must face and literally relive the sound of their trauma to find peace.

As I sat talking to my designers about this, one of them perked up and said "well that changes everything. I had always been sad because it seemed like all of Craver's love and best days were lost behind him. But this implies there might be a future too."

This is exactly the lightness I had felt after rereading the play last spring. There is nothing hopeful about a child maimed in a hate crime. There is nothing hopeful about the My Lai Massacre. There is nothing hopeful about two young gay soldiers getting slaughtered by their own colleagues for loving each other. But Wallace makes the thought experiment of what might happen if we interrupt our cultural amnesia and actually look at the hate, trauma, and violence in both our own hearts and the heart of our society. What happens if we stop hiding from the past, as if it is a tidy thing that can be put in a box and tucked away forever? She imagines that the outcome might be a world where Craver can reclaim his memories of the good days with Remzi, that he and Fairouz might live full lives in the future where they speak out against the world that killed Remzi, and that the soul of America's perpetual war is vanquished. The way to the light is through the dark. In order to reclaim the good things, we have to face the bad. America at its best, is a place where two men of different faiths and races can fall in love, and at its worst, a country that will kill them for their race, faith, and sexual identity. The play, to me is an act of ferocious love, and an act of patriotism. As such, the spine is to:

"Sound the cry of death, in order to live"

Character	Superobjective	Obstacles	Moment of Trauma
Fairouz	To reconcile with Remzi	Craver & army won't talk, Remzi is dead	Foot getting maimed for being Muslim
Craver	To live	He is a soldier, his love is illegal and socially unacceptable, he promised Remzi he would be the one to report his death	Watching Remzi die
Remzi	To live his truth	His love is illegal, he identifies as American in a country that sees people who look like him as the enemy, he is an Arab soldier serving for America in a war against Arabs, his job asks him to do unconscionable acts (Important: he says very early in the play, and rather nonchalantly that he is going to die, this acceptance removes an obstacle, death, that Fairouz, Craver, and Boxler seem to face.)	Fairouz's foot getting maimed
Lue Ming	To force Boxler to make the sound of his first death	She can't find him, his soul looks like the soul of every man who has had his soul run off during war	Calley shooting her child
Boxler	To avoid pain	Amnesty doesn't work for feelings, Lue Ming is the embodiment of everything he is trying to avoid	Killing a man in a well

Main Character/ Lens of the play:

From a strictly Aristotelian standpoint Fairouz is the protagonist of the play; she is the catalyst. That said, I don't think Wallace is working from a strictly Aristotelian perspective and we very much see the play through both her and Craver's eyes. They start and end the play together. The flashbacks in the play are their memories, and are colored by the lens of whichever one of them is remembering it. While it is Fairouz's mission to find her brother that incites the action of the play, Craver, as the reluctant participant, faces, in her quest, the greatest possibility of change and ultimately learns to speak of the unspeakable. For her part, Fairouz finds catharsis and closure through the information he discloses - and ultimately learns to make literal and figurative noise. Wallace uses the two of them to get at the love story between Craver and Remzi. While Remzi is not the lens of the play, he is certainly the central character and serves as the pivot point around which the entire play revolves.

Significant circumstance to all characters:

They are all placeless: Lue Ming and Boxler are often described as out of space and time, in a literal nowhere. They are trapped roaming between life and death. Craver is in a motel; Fairouz is in a motel. Remzi describes himself and Fairouz as "Palestinian, the gap between Arab-American."(Wallace 95) in an extended conversation they have about his desire to assimilate and her feelings of being a refugee. They are all victims of systemic oppression, even Boxler, who says "I was a child once. Hard to believe, isn't it? [...] I had a father I loved and a mother I loved, and then I went to school" (Wallace 120), reminding the audience that even he is the result of a system.

Significant Relationships:

Fairouz/Remzi: A brother sister pair. Her drive to reconcile with him is the catalyst of the play. By the end of the play their intimacy is capped with her line: "where you ended, I began." (Wallace 137) However, the last time they saw each other before he departed, she had said:

Fairouz: "I used to lie awake at night, for years, dreaming of ways to kill you. I thought: if I kill him, there will be no one to hate. I was investing my hatred in you. It was a long-term investment. Really, I think you owe me some thanks."
Remzi: For hating me?
Fairouz: Yes. Then you wouldn't be surprised by the hate of the world.

Clearly a deeply loving relationship, though it is not without incident; as children, he stood by and watched as a group of local children attack her, wanting to know if she, as a Muslim, had devils' feet. Fairouz's foot was crippled in the incident and ended up looking, in fact, like a hoof. Remzi seems to have spent many years making attempted reparations for the incident, often encouraging her through the pain. In their imagined reconciliation after his death, she is surprised to discover that when she finally sees him, it is not his name she finally says, but her own, that despite her journey to reach him, she was the one she needed to forgive, not him,

Fairouz/Craver: At the start of the play, they share nothing but their love of Remzi. He is the only chance she thinks she has of finding out what happened to Remzi, but he is refusing to talk. He engages in a veritable pissing contest in the first scene in an attempt to scare her off, but he is also bound to her from the early days of his relationship with Remzi when Remzi said: "I'm your friend, and you'd rather be the one to report my death than some jerk who doesn't know I exist[,]" (Wallace 89) and he agreed. She knows from Remzi's letters that they were together, but he does not know this. This relationship goes from adversaries to allies over the course of the play as coming to terms with Remzi's death teaches Craver to talk, and Fairouz to make noise.

Craver/Remzi: Served together in the lead up to and during Desert Storm. They fall in love. This is complicated by their racial and socioeconomic backgrounds and the fact that being gay in the military is illegal at this point in history. As Remzi says: "You're broke and I'm Arab. That about evens it out, doesn't it?" (Wallace 87) In the most explicitly violent moment of the play, Boxler turns Craver against Remzi by using a string of homophobic language. In an act of internalized homophobia Craver turns on Remzi when he tries to intercede, and Craver ends up

strangling him, Boxler egging him on calling him a "Faggot. Shit-fucker."(Wallace 101), and then pulling him back the moment before he actually kills/severely injures Remzi. For a long period before getting involved, Remzi read weapons manuals aloud as they went to sleep. Throughout the play Craver replaces words he doesn't have with descriptions of weapons, including an extended scene leading up to their first kiss. Not only was Remzi the first man Craver kissed, they lost their virginity together. Remzi was killed when their fellow soldiers found them together and Craver witnessed his death - when Remzi stood up for an Iraqi soldier who was being beaten while the two were in custody. In one of the final moments we see the two men together, the language that was once used to drive a wedge between them is the same language we hear recited in a reclamatory epitaph to the love they shared.

Boxler/Lue Ming: Boxler is the soul of Lieutenant Calley who murdered Lue Ming during the My Lai massacre. During the massacre, he told her that if she did what he wanted he wouldn't hurt her three year old daughter, but she says he "couldn't get it up." (Wallace 131) At that point, he shot her and then shot her child four times. He didn't know that she actually didn't die. She spent her life and death attempting to track him down. The two function almost like Greek gods fighting over the souls of the modern humans of the play. He is vanquished when she forces him to actually feel and make the sound of the moment he first killed someone.

Symbolism:

Rams Horn: A significant element of the plot involves a rams horn that Remzi has sent to Fairouz that she doesn't understand. When she was a 4th grader, Fairouz was attacked by other children who wanted to see if because she was Muslim she had a devil's hooved foot. Clearly she did not, but they beat her foot in the process leaving her crippled and looking like she had a hoof. The rams horn is significant in Jewish culture and references Numbers 10:9 in the Bible/Torah:

> "And if ye go to war in your land against the enemy that oppresseth you, then ye shall blow an alarm with the trumpets; and ye shall be remembered before the LORD your God, and ye shall be saved from your enemies." (King James Version, Numbers 10:9)

This exchange occurs in the last scene:

> Fairouz: I mean the ram's horn. What is it for?
> [...]
> Craver: He said if you blow on it, it will make a noise.
> [...]
> Fairouz: A noise.
> [...]
> Craver: Fucking loud.
> [..]
> Fairouz: Fucking loud. I like that. (Wallace 139)

In his death, Remzi has given Fairouz an instrument to make noise and call for help, a reparation for his inability to call out when she most needed him as a child.

Amnesty Box - In the second act Boxler speaks directly to the audience for the first time. He has an Amnesty Box and is offering the audience the opportunity to put things in it. His character is named after the box. In one monologue he says:

> This box you see before you is a very special box. It's a common device we use here within the military, a receptacle in which soldiers can relieve themselves of contraband, no questions asked. [...] What distinguishes this particular box is its stench. (Wallace 125)

Much of the play hinges on Wallace trying to prove that amnesty gets us nowhere, we can't just put atrocity in a box and forget about it or we will never learn from it or heal. Boxler represents this American tradition and specifically American military tradition of trying to put things in the box and forget about them. Lue Ming eventually recovers her own cutoff braid from this specific box. While Remzi is not the lens of the play, it is his murder that is metaphorically in the amnesty box, and around which the plot revolves.

Additional Significant Given Circumstances:

- The "present" of the play takes place in 1991 just after Desert Storm
- The "war" of the play takes place between the second part of 1990 and early 1991
- The beginning of the second act coincides with America's invasion of Iraq and the active part of Desert Storm
- Don't Ask Don't Tell, was signed in 1994, and repealed in 2010

- Boxler is the dead soul of the real Lieutenant Calley who in this fictionalized story attempted to rape and murder Lue Ming and who murdered her child during the My Lai massacre in 1968
- Both Craver and Remzi's fathers are dead, Craver's was killed by mining and it is is insinuated that Remzi's father may have died at the hands of American soldiers
- Neither Remzi nor Craver are out

Themes:

- To truly love something, you must see its strengths and weaknesses
- "The difference between patriotism and nationalism is that the patriot is proud of his country for what it does, and the nationalist is proud of his country no matter what it does; the first attitude creates a feeling of responsibility while the second a feeling of blind arrogance that leads to a war ." – Sidney J. Harris
- To disrupt an unending cycle of war, study its cause
- Violence is a mask for fear
- "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." - James Baldwin
- War shatters
- When something is shattered, putting the pieces together again will never remake the whole
- "Balance [can] be a bad thing, a trick to keep you in the middle, where things add up, where you can do no harm." (Wallace 138)
- Talking might keep you alive
- America is all its citizens
- Silence is deadly
- We are killers, watchers, or the dead

Conventions

- Remzi only exists in the past, and is as his sister and Craver remember him
- Lue Ming only exists in the present

- The other characters exist in both places
- At the start of the play, time and place are singular
- Craver uses weapon names when he has no language for the things he feels
- Characters almost never enter through doors, they apparate
- Characters do not speak in direct address, until Boxler speaks to the audience

Reversals

The four biggest reversals are that Craver decides to talk, Fairouz learns to be loud, Remzi learns to scream on behalf of another human, and Boxler screams the feeling of his first death.

Structure

One of the main challenges of this piece is its structure. The play blends seamlessly from cheap motel rooms in Kentucky to deserts in Saudi Arabia and Iraq to a family home in Atlanta. While it begins fairly straightforward with reality and memory both moving forward in time, this breaks down the deeper we get into the play. Time and location begin to blur and overlap, sometimes multiple times and places exist simultaneously or a character literally walks from one time/location to the other, or, in Lue Ming's case, walks into scenes and replaces Remzi without Fairouz noticing. During the event of the play, we are ostensibly in Iraq in early 1991, Kentucky later in 1991, and out of space and time entirely, all simultaneously.

I have created a timeline map for the show that continues to evolve but has been a staple in terms of understanding not only the action of the play, but how the design must serve the structure.

Politics

It is impossible to do a play by Naomi Wallace and ignore the politics of the piece. As Tony Kushner says on the back cover of the book: "Naomi Wallace commits the unpardonable sin of being partisan, and, the darkness and harshness of her work notwithstanding, outrageously optimistic. She seems to believe that the world can change." *Heart* delves into

several subjects she continues to write extensively about, the culmination of which is the intersectional world of the play, and each of which deserves a book of its own:

Palestine: Wallace has positioned Remzi and Fairouz at the center of this play and much of the interaction we see between them centers around their identities as American born Palestinians. From the earliest details we have, there is a tension between these two about whether they identify as American or Palestinian. Remzi's desire to assimilate takes him all the way to the Middle East where he is expected to kill other Arabs, but in the process, he visits his familial homeland and begins to understand a new kind of belonging. Wallace commented during an interview that:

> [D]uring the Gulf war the United States government refused to make links between historical situations. But we go nowhere if we don't make links. The attitude of "get out of the territory you just occupied" should have applied to all of the Middle East. Of course,there is the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, but that wasn't supposed to be related to Iraq invading Kuwait. So I thought, "I want to make links." (Istel 26)

Her criticism of the US government's fiscal support of the Israeli military shows up in Fairouz, who is struggling to reconcile the fact that Remzi has gone to fight for the Americans when America has fiscally aided Israel in their occupation.

Sexual Identity: Every time I read the play I feel Wallace saying, "Seriously? These two young men have put their lives on the line for America, are asked to literally cover up our atrocities, and America kills them for loving each other? They are the real American heroes." They love everything they are told not to love, a person of a different race and a person of the same gender. As they name the derogatory terms others have used for each of them in an intimate exchange, they essentially say to each other: I love you for all the reasons the rest of the world hates you. In one of the plays most moving passages, the following conversation occurs:

> Remzi: Why are we here killing Arabs?
> Craver: For love? Say it's for love. Don't say for oil Don't say for freedom. Don't say for world power. I'm sick of that. I'm so fucking sick of that. It's true, isn't it? We're here for love. Say it just once. For me.
> Remzi: We're here for love. (Wallace 124)

Wallace speaks to this in an interview with American Theatre Magazine:

> One of my leads into the play was thinking about the body in love and in war. While war is intent on destroying the body, love supposedly has a capacity to reconstruct or rediscover the body's sensuality. The body is central - and vulnerable - in both love and war. The question is: How does the body's sensuality or sexuality survive in the face of systems designed to destroy it - either war or late capitalism. That's why it's called In the Heart of America and not In the Heart of the Middle East. I wanted to explore the links between homophobia and racism within a U.S. institution - the military - which embodies a lot of mainstream values of Americanism and patriotism. Also, Remzi's cause of death - gay-bashing is an obvious metaphor for the brutalization of the body. (Istel 26)

American Military: The previous passage might as well fall under this title as well - expressing the skepticism of why the country is again at war. The vanquishing of Boxler begs the question: can we stop making war and how?

Class/Capitalism: A native of Kentucky, Wallace frequently writes about the world that surrounded her growing up. While her family was decidedly middle class, most of her friends were from working poor families. It is common in her work to find at least one character that relates back to this, in *Heart,* this is Craver. In the moment when Craver finally describes how Remzi died he says: “They caught us together, out behind the barracks. They were lower ranks. Just kids. Like me. Kids who grew up with garbage in their backyards. Kids who never got the summer jobs, who didn’t own CD players.” (Wallace 135) Craver, like many of her childhood peers, while having the privilege of being white, has few ways to get ahead in the world economically and has turned to the military. She is at once tender about this and simultaneously critical that capitalism has pitted the poor against each other and that in a desperation to get ahead in any way possible that difference of any sort is not tolerated, be it in the form of race or sexual identity. Craver watches the love of his life killed by his own. The play takes place with him in an unexplained motel room near home, that seems to serve as a type of exile from his community.

The Production

This is very much a language play. From the spine to most of the action, it lives in its words and its sounds. The penultimate scene of the play has two conclusions: "talking about it might keep me alive" and that the ram's horn will be "Goddamn, fucking loud!" (Wallace 139) The characters are seeking information, wrestling for the right words, claiming, and reclaiming language. They are begging each other to say things. They are using words to inflict violence that is somehow more violent and dangerous than the actual physical violence onstage, essentially charting the history and weaponization of racial and homophobic slurs. They are trying to speak the unspeakable.

Many of the integral moments of the play are described or re-lived through words absent of place. Craver notoriously lists or describes an entire tome worth of weapons in his attempt to avoid talking about his trauma, or to describe it when he has no words. In contrast, Remzi's use of language is often poetic and even nostalgic. Together they use racial slurs for each other as endearments. In the climactic moment of their final love scene, they are interrupted by the sound of jets and screams.

The language and sound of this show have also been my way into imagining this production.

A random internet search for "In the Heart of America" turned up a YouTube video with a children's song by the same title. The chintzy patriotism and bad rhyme were cloying. I was reminded how viscerally many people react to patriotic music and how divisive and/or inspiring it can be. Even within the text, Lue Ming sings a stanza of the version of Battle Hymn of the Republic that was rewritten for Lt. Calley. After listening to song after song, and a couple on repeat, I went back and reread the play, realizing I had essentially wrapped myself in an auditory American Flag. I finally understood a quote I had come across where Wallace described the play as a reaction against a very specific kind of patriotism. The contradiction of hearing music celebrating a nation capable of the atrocities that this play forces us to examine made me feel, deep in my bones, a desire to reclaim the America I love. In fact, that combination reminded me that there *is* an America I love. What does it mean to hear the song

"God Bless the USA" and actually feel "proud to be an American?" What does it mean to direct this play as an act of patriotism? Afterall, this is my America, my patriotism, where I get to team up with Naomi Wallace and take my country to task. I believe in a world where my Palestinian friend and my self-described redneck brother should be able to fall in love with each other if they want to, where people can walk down the street without fear of being attacked for their religious views or the color of their skin, and where we see war as an absolute last resort and don't send our young men and women to die for big oil, and most certainly don't murder them for finding love while serving. This tragedy Wallace has written is what's in the heart of America.

This production will serve two masters: the spine and the structure. In order to "Sound the cry of death, in order to live" I want to create an experience for my audience where they feel like they are looking at the truth, the cry of death, concealed inside our nation's amnesty box. From an emotional standpoint the production should feel cloying, suffocating, oppressive, until the moment when trauma is faced and the release valve is triggered, at which point it has light and air that has not existed previously.

While doing this, we face an immense challenge: the ever evolving fluidity of the structure. As we are going through our process we are very much focusing on how we can allow time and space the flexibility they require, while defining them when needed. Because lighting and sound have a permeability that objects don't, we are aiming for a space that allows them to do the heavy lifting. I imagine much of the Americana of the show will come aurally, while the visual action of the play reveals the inside of our national amnesty box. We are looking at ways to allow people to appear and disappear as easily as possible.

My hope is that this production will make our audience think deeply about what is buried in our nation's metaphorical amnesty box and also what is possible if we take ownership over it. Yes this love story ends with a tragedy, but that tragedy has also bound the two people left behind with love. It is the combined ownership of love and loss that sends them out into the world willing to speak up and make some noise. If we are lucky, this play might inspire a few more people do to the same.

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